**Two years of the AJK government**

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The AJK government, led by Raja Farooq Haider, recently completed two years in office. When he took over, Haider made several promises to end corruption, ensure development in the region, and implement cost-cutting measures aimed at restraining a wayward bureaucracy that was wreaking havoc with official resources.

In the short time-period of two years, he has managed to achieve some good results: enhancing the provision of health services, streamlining the recruitment process for government jobs, initiating a plethora of development schemes at the village level, and managing a better deal for the province by extracting a better share from the federal tax collection and cess on hydropower projects. In addition, the AJK prime minister managed to negotiate with the federal government to increase the annual development budget for the region by more than double.

More importantly, Farooq Haider’s stint has succeeded in making important structural changes in the architecture of governance that will have a far-reaching impact on people’s lives. The recent enactment of the 13th Amendment of the AJK interim constitution has granted the AJK Assembly all the legislative, administrative and financial powers that were hitherto vested within the AJK Council – an unelected clique of people that was long dubbed as a parallel government which wouldn’t work in consonance with the duly elected legislative assembly.

The amendment has now reduced the AJK Council from an all-encompassing entity into an advisory body. The amendment has also acknowledged and granted all fundamental rights to AJK citizens as admissible to the people of Pakistan.

What has remained a constant underperforming indicator is the government’s supposed commitment to what is euphemistically characterised as the Kashmir cause. Since 1947, politicians in Pakistan and AJK have built their politics and fortunes on the sufferings of Kashmiris without contributing meaningfully towards resolving the simmering problem. From Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to Nawaz Sharif, every Pakistani politician has used the tragedy of Kashmir to hoodwink gullible people and amass votes; men in khaki too have used it to prolong power.

More recently, former Punjab chief minister Shahbaz Sharif tried to use Kashmir in his last-minute desperate attempt to court the estranged public to vote for his party in the 2018 elections. Two days prior to the polling, he said that the PML-N would create an environment for Kashmir to join Pakistan if it came to power. He even criticised India, a rare feat, for human rights violations of Kashmiris and said, “Kashmir will become part of Pakistan through peace and development”.

The junior Sharif even indulged in a sort of last-minute ‘name-changing’ contest – a sport that has allowed him to frequently entertain the masses over the years – by saying that people can “change his name” if he doesn’t take Pakistan ahead of India after coming to power. The Indians “will come to Wagah Border and call Pakistanis their master”, he boastfully said during an election rally in Sargodha.

Prior to his oath as prime minister, Raja Farooq Haider had also stressed his commitment to Kashmir: “The liberation movement in Occupied Kashmir will be the PML-N government’s priority and I assure the people of Srinagar that we will remain at your side till the final solution of the Kashmir dispute”. At the time, Kashmir was embroiled in a mass agitation, with the government, led by Mehbooba Mufti, meting out atrocities and repression on defenceless civilians. However, the fiery rhetoric on Kashmir, which is often employed by the AJK leadership, has never been helpful.

It is regrettable that the AJK government’s choicest commitment remains what a leading Pakistani daily once called its “leadership’s preoccupation with protocol and foreign junkets at the expense of the state, ostensibly in the cause of Kashmir”.

Successive generations of AJK politicians, lawmakers and bureaucrats have used the bogey of the Kashmir cause to squander public money on foreign trips. These excursions are usually devoid of any value for Kashmiris and are mainly motivated by a desire to enjoy summer in the European climes to get some respite from the scorching sun. The current government has continued with this tradition and spent more than Rs10 million on foreign travels to “highlight the Kashmir issue” over the last two years.

Instead of indulging in high-powered oratory, the government ought to set some achievable targets that can contribute towards the wellbeing of at least those Kashmiris who have migrated to AJK since 1990, when the pro-freedom insurgency started. A large number of these refugees continue to live in makeshift dwellings in and around Muzaffarabad or in penury in Rawalpindi. This includes hundreds of former resistance fighters who have become demobilised due to age, ailments and family commitments. There is a frightening trend that many of them are dying heartbroken because they live in penury, and await financial assistance and rehabilitation.

Some of these refugees are extremely talented, and can contribute and enrich the cultural and social milieu in AJK. Altaf Mir, the Kashmiri folk singer who attained fame after Coke Studio recently released his song ‘Ha Gulo’, is just one such example of a gifted refugee. Back home in AJK, the Haider government has initiated programmes to offer technical education to fuel employment. It is also working on the province’s first-ever tourism policy that has the potential to create a sustainable stream of jobs for the youth. Mian Waheeduddin, the chief secretary, recently revealed that the government has identified over 400 locations that are to be developed as places of attraction for tourists.

AJK has been gifted with breathtaking beauty, which makes it far more pristine that any other side of the state. The only count where AJK fails is in terms of the infrastructure and human resources – from road networks to accommodation and trained personnel – needed to attract travellers and provide services to them. For that, the government must work with like-minded partners, both locally and internationally.

Perhaps it could start with TiKKA, a Turkish cooperation agency that already has a footprint in AJK. The agency can offer valuable assistance by linking the region with Turkish training and expertise as Turkey has one of the best and well-developed tourism industries.

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